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FLEXIBLE INTERCONNECTS FOR FUEL CELL STACKS

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[0001] The United States Government has rights in this invention pursuant to Contract No. W-7405-ENG-48 between the United States Department of Energy and the University of California for the operation of Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory.

RELATED APPLICATION

[0002] This application relates to U.S. Provisional Application No. 60/274,201 filed March 8, 2001, and claims priority thereof under 35 USC 120.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0003] The present invention relates to fuel cell interconnects, particularly to interconnects for fuel cell stacks, and more particular to flexible interconnects for fuel cell stacks which facilitates electrical connection and provides mechanical support with minimal mechanical stress.

[0004] Fuel cells are electrochemical devices that convert the chemical energy in fuels directly into electricity. Due to the thermodynamics of the reaction of the fuel and oxygen from air, single fuel cells have a voltage of about 1 volt. Thus, for practical applications, several cells must be stacked together to generate a higher voltage. The stacking of the cells require the use of an interconnect to electrically connect the cells. Most of the time, the interconnect also serves as the gas channels for the air and fuel flows. Figure 1, described in detail herein after, shows an exploded view of a conventional fuel cell stack having a cross-flow design for the air and fuel.

[0005] In Figure 1, the interconnect is made of an oxidation resistant alloy, and has spaced ribs that serve as the air and fuel channels. The structure is very similar to that of a heat exchanger. For good electrical contact, the interconnect must be in close physical contact with the single cells located on opposite sides. Due to the

unavoidable slight curvature of the ceramic fuel cells, good contact over the entire cell difficult. In addition, the areas that are located below the ribs of the interconnect are not directly exposed to the gas and thus gas starvation could occur, leading to low stack efficiency. On the other hand, interconnects with too thin ribs could have insufficient contact area with the cells. The stacking of metal interconnects with ceramic fuel cells can also cause high stress because of the rigidity of the structure and because of the difference in thermal behavior of metals and ceramics.

[0006] The present invention provides a solution to the above-reference problems associated with rigid ribs of the conventional interconnects, and provides in place of the rigid ribs, flexible "fingers" which will accommodate the imperfect flatness of the ceramic fuel cells. These flexible fingers enable improved electrical contact between cells and interconnects, and reduce the mechanical stress, as well as reducing areas subject to gas starvation.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0007] It is an object of the present invention to provide fuel cell stacks with flexible interconnects.

[0008] A further object of the invention is to provide fuel cell interconnects that facilitates electrical connection and provides mechanical support with minimal mechanical stress.

[0009] Another object of the invention is to replace the rigid ribs of conventionally known fuel cell interconnects with interconnects having flexible fingers.

[0010] Another object of the invention is to provide fuel cell interconnections with flexible fingers which will accommodate any imperfect flatness of the fuel cells.

[0011] Another object of the invention is to provide interconnect plates having flexible fingers on both sides of the plate.

[0012] Another object of the invention is to provide interconnect plates wherein only the air side must be made of oxidation resistant material, and the fingers on the fuel side made of flexible high conductivity material.

[0013] Another object of the invention is to provide back-to-back interconnect made from a single plate with fingers pointing up as well as down to form a common connection to two electrodes.

[0014] Other objects and advantages of the present invention will become apparent from the following description and the accompanying drawings. The present invention involves flexible interconnects for fuel cell stacks. The flexible member or fingers facilitates electrical connection, enables mechanical support with minimal mechanical stress, and the flexibility accommodates any imperfect flatness of the fuel cells, such as the ceramic cell. In addition, the area of the cell that is in contact with the fingers of the interconnect is smaller than the conventional rigid ribs and thus less gas starvation is provided. The interconnects can be made of three plates, for example, with a separator plate, a plate with flexible fingers or contact pads on the fuel side, and a plate with flexible fingers on the air side. Only the air side plate must be made of oxidation resistant material, while the fuel side plate can be made of flexible high conductivity material. Also, the interconnection can be fabrication in a back-to-back configuration from a single plate with flexible finger extending in opposite directions to form a common connection for two electrodes. The length and size of each flexible finger can be tailored to each individual application.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF DRAWINGS

[0015] The accompanying drawings, which are incorporated into and form a part of the disclosure, illustrate an embodiment of the invention and, together with the description, serve to explain the principles of the invention.

[0016] Figure 1 illustrates a fuel cell stack with the prior art rigid rib interconnects.

[0017] Figures 2A and 2B illustrate an embodiment of the present invention utilizing short flexible fingers, with Figure 2B being a side exploded view of Figure 2A.

[0018] Figures 3A and 3B illustrate an embodiment of the invention utilizing longer length flexible fingers, Figure 3B being a side exploded view of Figure 3A.

[0019] Figures 4A and 4B illustrate a back-to-back flexible finger arrangement for interconnecting electrodes on opposite sides of the interconnect, with Figure 4B being a side view of Figure 4A.

[0020] Figure 5 illustrates an embodiment of the invention utilizing a flexible bridge structure.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0021] The present invention involves flexible interconnects for fuel cell stacks. The interconnect of this invention facilitates electrical connection and mechanical support with minimal mechanical stress for fuel cell stacks. This leads to mechanically robust fuel cell stacks with higher stack performance at lower cost. The present invention replaces the rigid ribs of prior known interconnects with contact pads that can be in the form of flexible fingers or bridges. Due to the particular shape, and if an appropriate alloy is used, the fingers can have some flexibility which will accommodate the imperfect flatness of the ceramic fuel cells. This enables a significant improvement for the electrical contact between cells and interconnects. The mechanical stress will be smaller due to the flexibility of the

fingers. In addition, the area of the single cells that is in contact with the interconnect can be large without causing any serious gas starvation because of the thinner "legs".

[0022] The interconnects of this invention utilizes plates which can actually be made of three layers with one separator plate or layer in the middle, one plate with fingers on the fuel side, and one plate with fingers on the air side. Only the plate on the air side must be made of an oxidation resistant alloy, such as Inconel 600 or 601, Hanes 230, and some ferritic stainless steel. The plate with the fingers on the fuel side can be made of the same materials on the air side, or flexible material or metal with high conductivity, such as copper, silver, and gold, without fear of oxidation. The separate plate can be made of the same materials as on the air side. The thickness can be made thicker in order to serve as mechanical support to the entire structure.

[0023] In a back-to-back configuration, the fingers can be made from one plate, with the fingers pointed up as well as down to form a common connection to two electrodes. Length and size of each finger can be tailored to each individual application with a minimum of expenditure for forming tooling. The any one plate can be provided with fingers of varying length and/or width, as well as being made from various materials depending on the intended application.

[0024] Referring now to the drawings, Figure 1 illustrate a fuel cell stack utilizing prior art interconnectors having rigid ribs, while Figures 2A-2B, 3A-3B, and 4A-4B illustrate embodiments of interconnects made in accordance with the present invention using flexible fingers.

[0025] As seen in Figure 1, a fuel cell stack generally indicated at 10, includes two ceramic single cells 11 and 12, each single cell including an anode 13, and electrolyte 14, and a cathode 15, with an interconnector 16 located beneath fuel cell 11 and an interconnector 17 located intermediate fuel cells 11 and 12. Each interconnector 16

and 17 include a series of rigid ribs 18 and 19 on opposite side thereof, with ribs 19 extending perpendicular to ribs 18, whereby air passes through the areas between ribs 18 and fuel passes through the areas between ribs 19, as indicated by arrows 20-21 and arrows 22-23, respectively.

[0026] Figures 2A-2B illustrate a three plate embodiment of an interconnect of the invention generally indicated at 30 and including outer plates 31 and 32 with a separator plate 33 therebetween, as seen in the exploded side view of Figure 2B. The upper outer plate 31 is provided with a plurality of outwardly projecting fingers or contact pads 34, each having a tapered section 35 and flat or straight section 36, and are formed by a punching process of plate 31 without removing material from the plate, as known in the art. Similarly lower outer plate 32 is provided with projecting fingers or contact pads 37 having a tapered second 38 and flat or straight section 39. As pointed out above, only the air side of the interconnect 30 (plate 31 or 32) must be made of or coated with oxidation resistant material, with separator plate 33 being composed of the same material such as for the air side.

[0027] By way of example, the fingers 34 and 37 of plates 31 and 32 may have a overall length of 6 to 15 mm and a width of 4 to 10mm, thickness of 1 to 20 μ m preferably 5 to 10 μ m, with the tapered sections being at an angle of 30° to 80° with a length of 2 to 10mm, and the flat sections having a length of 4 to 10mm. The separator plate 33 may have a thickness of 10 to 200 μ m, preferably 20 to 50 μ m. As pointed out above, the fingers 37 of plate 32 may be of different sizes or shapes than fingers 34 of plate 31, or the various fingers on either plate may be of different sizes and shapes to accommodate various applications. Because of thermal expansion compatibility and simplicity, one may desire to utilize the same material for all layers. Also, the difference in fuel and air flows may require different spacings.

[0031] It has thus been shown that the present invention provides interconnects for cell stacks which overcome the problems of the prior art interconnect. The interconnects of this invention replace the prior know rigid ribs with flexible fingers or contact pads, which may be sized for various applications. These flexible interconnects can also be used in other devices, such as: steam electrolyzers, ceramic oxygen generators, ceramic hydrogen generators, CO₂ electrolyzers, etc.

[0032] While particular embodiments of the invention have been illustrated, along with particular parameters and materials, to exemplify and teach the principles of the invention, such are not intended to be limiting. Modifications and changes may become apparent to those skilled in the art, and it is intended that the invention be limited only by the scope of the appended claims.